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Status and media use in the Netherlands

Do partners affect media tastes?

Gerbert Kraaykamp^{a,*}, Koen van Eijck^b, Wout Ultee^c, Kees van Rees^d

^a *Department of Sociology, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9104,
6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

^b *Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium*

^c *Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

^d *Tilburg University, The Netherlands*

Abstract

In this article, we estimated the impact of respondents' and partners' status on media use, employing four waves of the Family Survey Dutch Population spanning the 1992–2003 period ($n = 5600$). Media use was measured by literary book reading, popular book reading, and television watching. Although these types of cultural behavior are typically undertaken at home, and thus not directly visible as status markers, it was hypothesized that status effects would be significant because preferences for certain books and TV programs are regular conversation topics and their popularity differs between social strata. Indeed, we did find positive effects of respondent's and partner's status for literary book reading and negative effects of respondent's status on the amount of time spent watching TV for both men and women. Popular book reading was only negatively affected by partner's status for women, whereas only men were found to reduce their TV time in response to a higher status spouse. Status effects were controlled for education of both partners, household income, and a number of other resources in order to make sure we would be capturing the net effect of status. Our results clearly indicate that status considerations are important, even if it pertains to partner status and even when the behavior under study takes place in a private environment.

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1. Introduction

According to Bourdieu's concept of homology, people's cultural preferences can be derived from their cultural and economic status position. In line with this argument, it can be expected

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: g.kraaykamp@maw.ru.nl (G. Kraaykamp).

URL: <http://oase.uci.ru.nl/~gerbertk/>

that people are inclined to select primarily those media that fit their social status, with respect to both their own social position and the social position of their spouse. In this article, we will try to find out whether this is indeed the case. Empirical research confirms the idea that media preferences are highly differentiated, that is, they tend to cluster in repertoires peculiar to groups differentiated by age, gender, and status (Van Rees and van Eijck, 2003). Hence, to a large extent, the preferential differentiation has a social basis. There is ample empirical evidence for the claim that members of the higher social strata prefer complex and prestigious media, while lower status groups tend to prefer the more accessible, lighter media (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999; Kraaykamp, 2001). More specifically, members of the higher status groups prefer the reading of literature while those with lower social status favor romantic fiction (Kraaykamp, 2002). Even the audience for television – a democratic, highly accessible media type – gives evidence of similar social differences as higher classes prefer viewing artistic and cultural programs, whereas the middle and lower classes favor soap operas, reality programs, and action movies over highbrow productions (Kraaykamp, 2002; Kuipers, 2006).

To explain social differentiation in media preferences, the standard approach tends to focus on two core actors of the socialization environment, i.e., parents and school (Kraaykamp, 2001, 2003; Nagel and Ganzeboom, 2002; Verboord and van Rees, 2003). Parents' own media use, notably their highbrow cultural consumption and their specific instructional activities, positively affects their children's preference for highbrow books and ditto television programs (Kraaykamp, 2001, 2003). Schooling effects have also proven to be particularly relevant in explaining media preferences. Schools shift students according to their abilities by assigning cognitively talented students to more challenging tracks than the less gifted ones. Presuming highbrow media use to be more difficult and to require the ability to process complex information, people who completed higher education are likely to participate more frequently in such activities. Besides, schools and their curricula differ markedly in the amount of attention and time they give to the teaching of high culture. At higher education levels, more time is spent on teaching literary knowledge and on reading higher-level materials (Kraaykamp, 2003; Verboord and van Rees, 2003). Hence, parental and educational socialization provide an important reason why higher educated people have cultural resources enabling them to derive pleasure from the consumption of highbrow media.

A major drawback of the socialization-oriented research is that it primarily considers aspects of information processing while disregarding status dimensions of media use. The focus on people's intellectual and cultural competences leads to an underestimation, or even neglect, of the role of status (variables), of the extent to which book reading and TV watching, for example, may also be related to gaining social rewards. Most of the research on taste hierarchies in relation to status differentiation focused on highbrow cultural activities outside the home (attending theatre plays, concerts, or visiting museums; Katz-Gerro, 2004; Kraaykamp et al., 2006) and neglected cultural practices inside the home. For two related reasons, this selectivity may be said to make sense. First, following Bourdieu (1984), it can be argued that highbrow cultural consumption makes for the most profitable, prestigious type of cultural capital. In that sense, attendance of highbrow culture is a resource likely to be related to opportunities in other domains of life (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). Admittedly, this holds for cultural practices outside and inside the home. Secondly, following Weber and Veblen, as lifestyle choices provide group members with the status symbols necessary to recognize and select one another in social interaction, visibility is an important aspect of cultural practices. As visiting cultural events is socially conspicuous, it is better suited to communicate a status position to the outside world. In contrast, media activities are inherently solitary activities; reading and television viewing are

typically done within the confines of one's home and, therefore, have little immediate communicative value. Because of its specific qualities, media use is likely to be affected more strongly by media socialization and educational qualifications than by status considerations.

Yet, in spite of this characterization of media use as a solitary activity, there are good reasons to expect status considerations also to affect media consumption. As mentioned above, media preferences are a popular conversation topic. People talk with each other about books they have read or television programs they have seen (or avoided). To the extent that these types of media preferences are socially distinct, they provide people with an opportunity to exemplify to what social group they belong. Media content is associated with certain status qualities that attract particular audiences. Thus, while literary book genres and informative television programs tend to appeal more frequently to prestigious tastes, romantic fiction and television's main fare (soaps, reality, sports, and pop music programs termed 'popular entertainment') are preferred by the lower classes. People's endorsing highbrow cultural norms on literature and reading explains part of their elitist book reading preferences (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999). Finally, media behavior is also affected by significant others (partner and close friends), implying that others can bring certain media to one's attention (information exchange), or that people tend to attune their media preferences to relevant others, once again giving evidence that media preferences are social in nature.

In this article, we investigate to what extent a person's own status position as well as that of his/her partner affects media preferences. In addition, we will examine whether and to what extent women and men differ in this respect. Do men affect their female partners more than women affect their male partners? To answer these questions, we draw on four surveys held between 1992 and 2003 ($n = 5600$) containing relevant information regarding people's status position, their partner's status position, and three types of media use, namely, literary book reading, popular book reading, and the time spent watching television.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Hypotheses on individual status effects*

In examining status effects on cultural consumption, we follow Bourdieu's argument that people confirm their social position through their cultural behavior. Cultural tastes are directly linked to the memberships of social groups and can be perceived as group-specific symbols for expressing a status position to the outside world (Bourdieu, 1984; Kraaykamp, 2002). This study focuses on types of cultural behavior that in this context may appear somewhat atypical, insofar as book reading and TV watching are not visible to the outside world. But the knowledge gained through these activities, or the mere fact of telling others about what one has seen or read, is definitely put to use in social interaction. Hence, it is to be expected that media preferences are commonly shared within status groups and provide their members with a sense of group identification and concurrently make it possible for group members to distance themselves from other status groups (DiMaggio, 1994).

Empirical literary studies that took into account status motivations for book reading suggest that reading preferences are indeed partly affected by social rewards (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999). Ganzeboom (1982) argues that, in trying to explain differential participation in highbrow culture, status seeking theories and information processing must be viewed as distinct models. Status seeking theories aim at understanding cultural participation as a means to gain or confirm a high social esteem. Differences in the appreciation of cultural practices can thus be understood by

looking at both people's status position and the cultural classification of products that are the object of their specific practices. Several empirical studies reveal status effects on cultural consumption, albeit indirectly (Halle, 1993; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Schulze, 1995). In communication research, the uses-and-gratification theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974) states that people select media and media content that fit their personal qualities. Presuming that differentiation in media preferences is determined at least in part by people's different psychological and social attributes, we might argue that media choices are related to a person's status position (Roe, 2000).

What are the major characteristics defining a status group? In the neo-Weberian tradition adopted by Bourdieu (1984), it is argued that the quantity and type of resources individuals possess are relevant determinants of taste differentiation. Consequently, in lifestyle research, usually cultural, economic, and sometimes social resources have been distinguished. These studies proceed on the assumption that members from higher status groups employ these resources to stress or establish a high status position. Previous empirical studies on taste distinction often used both educational level and occupation as measures of a person's status position (Bourdieu, 1984). A drawback of such an approach is that it fails to disentangle aspects of status seeking from those of information processing, since educational qualifications clearly enhance an individual's cultural competencies and thus his/her information processing capacities. Here, we will use educational level as sole indicator of cultural competence, and the esteem associated with an individual's occupation as a measure of a his/her status position. Note that this is a rigorous test of the idea that status matters. After all, it cannot be ruled out that, to some extent, educational attainment also encourages status seeking directly, since higher schooling levels typically lead to more prestigious jobs and intelligence in itself is valued positively as well. Except for Roe (2000) and Chan and Goldhorpe (2006), we are not aware of any media research that explicitly studies status effects.

In applying this idea of status seeking to the domain of media use, our argument runs along the same lines. Members of the higher status groups are likely to use exclusive and prestigious media, thereby distinguishing themselves from lower status groups. Hence, prestigious book reading serves to bear out a high status position, whereas more popular reading and intense television viewing might harm the elite's status claims. On the contrary, those with a low social status are likely to experience a distance between their status and the prestige related to literary reading, furthering the inclination to disregard it. Popular reading and television viewing fit their status position more adequately. These people's low status position limits the rewards they can obtain from choosing elite media. Our first hypothesis on status therefore reads: *The higher people's occupational status, the more they will read literary books and the less they will read popular books and watch television intensively.*

2.2. Hypotheses on effects of partner status

Status motives in cultural participation are not confined to a person's own qualities. Status characteristics of people's social network also count (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra, 1999; Upright, 2004). Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste also focuses on how members of the elite(s) share similar preferences. Social groups are defined and communicated to the outside world through commonly shared norms indicating whether the approval of cultural practices is either unqualified and widespread, qualified and limited, or even inexistent. Group solidarity is both demonstrated and nurtured through a sharing of tastes and preferences (DiMaggio, 1987).

An analogy of this sociological argument is found in reader-oriented literary theories claiming that reader preferences result from beliefs and agreements within communities of readers (Dorfman, 1996). When it comes to media preferences, accommodation to group-specific tastes may occur, for instance, when people discuss television programs or books they have read. Furthermore, tastes can be communicated to relevant others by giving books as a birthday present, the visibility of a bookcase filled with “interesting” books, or by recommending specific television programs. Conformation to group norms on media preferences facilitates integration into a social network. Therefore, people are likely to adopt media preferences that fit the status of their social network. Higher status people with more differentiated networks may be expected to develop broader and more highbrow media tastes, not so much to show off but to be able to better cope with changing social contexts. In contrast, we expect to find a more limited and outspoken media taste for popular entertainment among the lower educated whose networks tend to be more limited and locally bounded (Erickson, 1996).

Several studies discuss the effects of partner characteristics on cultural consumption (De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1990; Upright, 2004; Van Berkel and de Graaf, 1995). For the Netherlands, De Graaf and Ganzeboom (1990) found that the relative impact of a partner’s educational attainment on cultural consumption was 33%, as compared to 48% for own education. Moreover, Van Berkel and de Graaf (1995) conclude that for men the effect of a partner’s education on cultural participation increased over time. For the United States, Upright (2004) also found substantial educational partner effects on cultural behavior; for six out of the seven cultural categories studied, a higher educated spouse raised the likelihood of participating. With respect to media preferences, it is hard to find research that incorporates partner aspects. In studying whether partner’s education might account for the differentiation in reading level, Kraaykamp (1993) did not find any significant results.

The overall conclusion from the studies referred to above that the impact of one’s spouse on cultural consumption seems substantial has to be qualified, insofar as they focus on education as the major partner variable affecting cultural behavior. These educational effects are open to various interpretations. First, through their cultural knowledge and interest, higher educated partners contribute to their spouses’ cultural socialization. This can hardly be interpreted as a status effect, since it increases first and foremost a person’s cultural competence. Secondly, a higher educated partner may contribute to a family’s financial means (economic resources), which renders cultural consumption more affordable. This economic impact cannot be interpreted as a genuine status effect either. Finally, partner’s educational level is thought to represent also the social level of a person’s network. Only in the latter case may educational level be seen as an indicator of social status. The abovementioned arguments indicate that effects of partner’s status must be assessed net of educational and income effects. In studying the impact of partner’s social status on media participation, we, therefore, control for a partner’s educational position and household income.

We expect that relevant others in one’s social network may enhance one’s status, provided they are the “right” people. Whether a social conformation effect occurs can be assessed by measuring partner’s social status. Thus, the second hypothesis on status is: *The higher a partner’s occupational status position, the more a person will read literary books and the less one will read popular books and watch television intensively.*

Do these partner effects of status differ between men and women? It is hard to formulate concrete expectations on male–female differences. The logic of the division of labor, says Bourdieu (1984), gives precedence to women in matters of taste. But gender per se is not a core variable in Bourdieu’s account of the sense of distinction. So far, women have been shown to play

a major role in children's cultural education. It is sometimes stated that women derive status from their partner more than the other way around. Van Berkel and de Graaf (1995) refer to this as the male-dominance hypothesis. If this were true for media consumption, we would expect that, for women, a high-status partner is more important than for men when it comes to media consumption. The third hypothesis on male–female differentiation in status effects states: *Women with a male partner with a high occupational status position are more inclined to read literary books and are less inclined to read popular books and intensively watch television than men with a female partner with a high occupational status position.*

2.3. *Effects of the controls*

Several control variables will be included. First, a person's educational level will be included as an indicator of a person's cultural resources. Following the information processing theory, it is believed that, because of their cultural competence, higher educated people will prefer literary books more often and popular book genres and television watching to a lesser extent. Note that we do control for social differentiation due to these cultural competency effects of partners as well.

Secondly, we want to control for the economic differentiation that obviously correlates with status. Although media use can hardly be regarded as expensive behavior, book reading can be costly if one prefers to buy books, and television viewing requires a TV set and cable subscription. In order to make sure that the status effects we might find do not reflect differences in financial resources, household income will be included. Thirdly, a number of parental background measures will be included to control for the effects of a highbrow socialization. Our expectation is that people from higher-status backgrounds will have more elite media preferences than people from a lower-status background. Although it might be argued that parents, like partners, are relevant others in media consumption, we presume that the main effects of parental characteristics are to be understood in terms of early socialization.

3. Data and measurement

3.1. *Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003*

We test our expectations regarding the effects of status on media preferences with the Family Survey Dutch Population (Ultee and Ganzeboom, 1992; De Graaf et al., 1998, 2000, 2003). Primary respondents and their partners were questioned using a face-to-face computer-assisted interview, and an additional written questionnaire. Respondents in all four surveys were selected from a random sample of the non-institutionalized Dutch population between 18 and 70 years of age. In the interviews, a complete educational history, occupational career, and family history of both spouses were collected with retrospective structured questioning. While one partner answered the written questionnaire, the interviewer conducted a computer-assisted interview with the other person, and vice versa. The formulation of the questions and the format of the surveys are highly comparable over time. The data not only contain information on occupational positions, social background, and family structure, but also include several questions on reading and television watching. For our purpose, we selected only respondents with valid scores on all relevant variables. We also excluded single respondents since we are interested in partner effects on media behavior. Finally, we employed

the information on both partners as if they were independently sampled. Although this leads to lower standard errors for the model's estimates, analyses solely on primary respondents did not lead to different results. Therefore, we analyzed information on 5600 individuals from 2844 couples.¹

3.2. Measurements

Our main research question reads: *To what extent do personal status and partner's status aspects affect media use?* To represent media behavior, we selected several questions on reading and television watching from our questionnaire. To measure *literary book reading*, we added respondents' scores on items on reading Dutch literary novels and on reading translated literary novels. Categories varied between never (0), sometimes (1), and often (2). Though in the 1992 questionnaire these categories were formulated slightly differently, they are presumed to be functionally equivalent.² The computed variable is standardized between 0 and 100. *Popular book reading* is represented by an additive scale of romantic novel reading and family and regional novel reading, again with answering categories never (0), sometimes (1), and often (2). Here, too, we standardized our measurement between 0 and 100. As with literary reading, the answering categories in 1992 differed. More importantly, however, in 1992 a category label varied from that in the other surveys. Instead of "family and regional novels", in 1992 the category "regional and historical novels" was presented to the respondents. In spite of this dissimilarity, we decided to include the 1992 survey measure in our scale. Analyses without the 1992 data did not reveal substantial differences.

We analyzed the amount of hours a respondent watches television per week as a measure of his or her audio-visual media preferences. *Television watching* in 1998, 2000, and 2003 is measured by two questions on average viewing hours on weekdays and on weekend days. The answering categories were: never (0), less than 1 h a day (1), 1–2 h a day (2), 2–3 h a day (3), and more than 3 h a day (4). Scores were added and rearranged in such a way that they represent the number of hours of television watching per week. Here the situation for 1992 was different as well, since the amount of time spent on TV was asked separately for each day of the week, with answering categories: 0–15 min (0), 15–45 min (1), 45–90 min (2), 90–120 min (3), and more than 120 min (4). Again, we added the scores and rearranged them to represent hours of television watching per week. For reasons of comparability with the reading indicators, we standardized the scores between 0 and 100. Van Eijck and van Rees (2000) found status differentiation in the television viewing behavior of five specific reader types. In addition, their analyses made it clear that members from the higher educational strata were most likely to limit their total time spent on watching TV and least likely to focus on commercial TV stations. Similarly, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP, 2004) reports more weekly hours spent in front of the TV screen as schooling levels are lower.

To construct a *status* scale, we used the method proposed by Chan and Goldhorpe (2004). They employ "differential associations" to assign status scores to so-called minor occupational groups (MOG). For the Netherlands, we identified 26 feasible MOGs by means of the four-digit occupational classification of Statistics Netherlands (see Appendix A). Status scores have been

¹ From 1992, we have 1309 respondents; from 1998, 1417; from 2000, 1194; and from 2003, 1680. Note that in 88 cases some relevant information to employ a partner as primary respondent is missing. That is why we do not have information on 5688 respondents from the 2844 couples.

² In the 1992 survey answering categories read: never (0), at least once a year (1), and frequently each year (2).

appointed to respondents on the basis of their current occupation or, if they were non-working, their last occupation and range from -1.75 to 1.90 . This status score correlates nicely with a respondent's own education ($r = 0.53$) and his/her father's education ($r = 0.27$). It also is strongly related ($r = 0.83$) to the often-used standard international socio-economic index (ISEI) developed by Ganzeboom et al. (1992).³

In addition to the status aspects of both respondents and partners, we included educational attainment, a person's work status, and household income. A person's highest level of education is observed in 10 categories, running from (1) primary school (not finished) to (10) doctorate (PhD). We recoded it into the number of years required to obtain a degree at that level. Accordingly, for both respondents and partners, *education in years* ranges from 5 to 21 (centered around 10). *Work status* is coded (0) non-working and (1) working in paid labor. *Household income* is equalized in Dutch guilders (from Euros), and logged for reasons of presentation (centered around 8). A major drawback of our income measure is that it has been obtained differently in all four surveys. Note that the effects of household income should be interpreted with care.

We employed several controls. We used a dummy variable for *gender* (0 = men; 1 = women). Degree of *urbanization* is available in five levels ranging from urban (1) to rural (5). *Year of birth* is a continuous variable with values between 1915 and 1985. It is centered around 1950. To control for family obligations that might restrict cultural participation, the *number of children under the age of 4* and *between 4 and 12 years* is taken into account. Possible variation due to different measurements in the questionnaires is dealt with controlling for *survey year* (1992–2003), which was nullified at 1992. Family background is observed through *father's education* and *father's status*. Father's educational level is recoded into the number of years required to obtain a degree at a certain level and ranges from 5 to 21. For reasons of presentation, it is centered around 10. Father's status is measured employing the status scale that was also used for respondents and partners. A description of all variables is presented in Table 1. A summary of mean scores on the dependent variables is shown in Appendix B.

4. Description

In order to provide a description of status effects on media preferences, we recoded respondent's and partner's status into quintiles. For a first impression of the relation between these two status scores and media use, Figs. 1–3 present the effects of the status of the respondent (continuous line) and the partner (dotted line) on literary reading, popular reading, and television watching, respectively. We differentiate between men and women. The effect of the respondent's status is controlled for the partner's status effect and vice versa, and we also controlled for year of birth. The results displayed in these figures were obtained through MCA analyses.

Fig. 1 shows the effects of the two status variables on literary book reading. Interest in literary books increases monotonically as the status of both the respondent and the partner goes up, although the former effect is more pronounced. For men, scores range from about 10 for the

³ Initially, we also wanted to incorporate social class in our analyses, using the EGP class scheme. This caused multicollinearity problems because of the strong association between class and status in the Netherlands. This issue is discussed in more detail in Kraaykamp et al. (2006) and will also be addressed in a forthcoming book on comparative studies on the effects of class and status, edited by Chan and Goldthorpe.

Table 1
Description of the variables

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variables				
Literary book reading (scale 0–100)	27.00	32.08	0	100
Popular book reading (scale 0–100)	20.35	28.13	0	100
Television watching (hours per week: scale 0–100)	53.12	27.56	0	100
Control variables				
Women	1.51	0.50	1	2
Degree of urbanization (1 = urban, 5 = rural)	3.12	1.31	1	5
Year of birth (1950 = 0)	4.85	12.29	–35	35
Number of children <4 years of age	0.26	0.56	0	3
Number of children 4–12 years of age	0.44	0.79	0	4
Year of survey (1992 = 0)	6.52	4.06	0	11
Education father in years (10 = 0)	–0.32	3.60	–4	11
Father's status score	–0.15	0.80	–1.75	1.90
Respondent characteristics				
Education in years (10 = 0)	2.34	3.53	–5	11
Employment status (1 = paid work)	0.71	0.45	0	1
Respondent's status score	0.16	0.85	–1.75	1.90
Partner characteristics				
Partner's status score	0.16	0.85	–1.75	1.90
Education partner in years (10 = 0)	2.34	3.53	–5	11
Household income, natural log (8 = 0)	0.13	0.51	–4.53	3.86

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 (N = 5600).

lowest status respondents to about 34 for those in the highest status quintile. For partner status, these numbers are 14 and 30. The relations with own status and partner status are somewhat stronger for women (literary reading scores range between 22 and 51 for own status and between 25 and 43 for partner status). Although the overall picture is similar for men

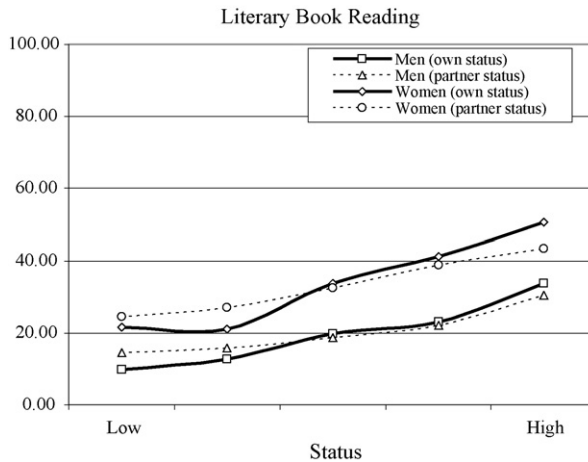


Fig. 1. Literary book reading by own status (controlled for cohort and partner status) and partner status (controlled for cohort and own status) – separately for men and women (scale-values).

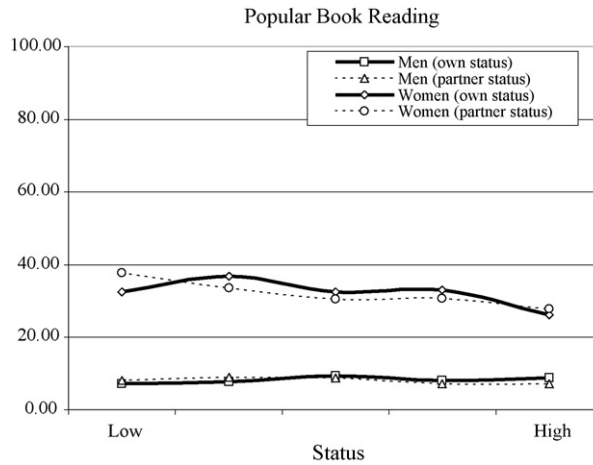


Fig. 2. Popular book reading by own status (controlled for cohort and partner status) and partner status (controlled for cohort and own status) – separately for men and women (scale-values).

and women, literary reading is clearly more of a feminine leisure activity than a masculine one.

Popular reading shows a completely different picture (Fig. 2). For men, there is hardly any association with their own or their partner's status when it comes to reading family, regional, and romantic novels. For women the picture is more in line with our predictions; with a rising status position of either the respondent or her partner, reading popular books becomes less attractive.

In Fig. 3, the picture for television watching shows a negative relation with both status variables for men and women; a higher status position is associated with less hours of television watching. The impact of partner status for women seems somewhat less than the other three status effects.

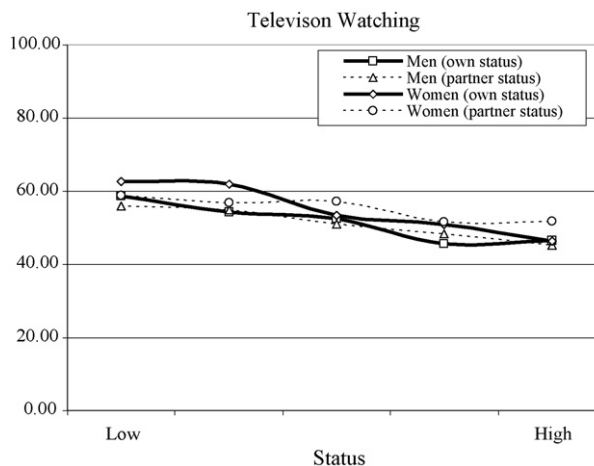


Fig. 3. Television watching by own status (controlled for cohort and partner status) and partner status (controlled for cohort and own status) – separately for men and women (scale-values).

These descriptive results underscore that partner status is an important quality in predicting media preferences. However, the question is whether these effects remain significant, when aspects of education, social background, and family cycle are taken into consideration.

5. Results

To test our hypotheses, we apply an OLS-regression to the three selected aspects of media preferences. We estimate four models. Model 1 is the baseline model, comprising degree of urbanization, year of birth, family situation, year of survey, family background, work status, and educational attainment as controls. In model 2, we test whether the individual status position affects a person's media preferences. Model 3 includes the partner's status score, and in model 4 we check whether a partner's educational attainment and household income are influential. We analyze men and women separately to display potential gender differences in status effects.

In the case of literary book reading, the coefficients for the controls are as expected (see Table 2a). People from younger birth cohorts ($\beta = -0.15$ for men and $\beta = -0.21$ for women) and rural descent ($\beta = -0.12$ for men and $\beta = -0.09$ for women) read literature less often. Surprisingly, having children does not hamper a person's literary book reading. Only for women, some small negative effects of having children in the age of 4–12 years can be discerned. The negative effect of year of survey indicates a decreasing interest in literature among men. For women, no significant trend can be observed. Apparently, literary reading has become more feminized over the years. The effects of family background are as expected; men and women from the higher social strata have a stronger preference for literary reading. However, a higher social origin is more important for women's book reading preferences than it is for men.

In all models, respondents' own educational attainment positively affects the taste for literary fiction; for men, each additional year of schooling raises the score with 2.9 scale points ($\beta = 0.37$), and for women this is even 3.9 scale points ($\beta = 0.40$). These effects decline quite a bit if we move to model 4 (to 0.22 and 0.29, respectively), but in each case education remains the most important determinant of literary reading. Does social status affect literary reading? Model 2 shows clear and significant effects of a person's status position; a high social status goes together with a taste for literary book reading ($\beta = 0.18$ for men and $\beta = 0.16$ for women). In models 3 and 4, partner aspects are introduced. First, for both men and women, a high-status partner proves to matter to literary book reading. This is remarkable insofar as book reading is a private activity that need not be influenced by social network aspects. Secondly, inclusion of a partner's education and household income shows that partner status effects can in part be interpreted in terms of economic resources and the socializing aspects of having a higher educated partner. For men, the partner status effect declines from 0.11 to 0.06 between models 3 and 4, for women it decreases from 0.14 to 0.09. Yet, the effects of individual and partner status remain relevant in studying a private home activity like literary reading.

An additional analysis, not reported here, checked on the interaction of gender with the partner status measures, to determine whether partner status effects differ for men and women. For women, partner's status proved to be significantly more important than for men: an extra point on the scale for their partner's status caused an extra 3.3 gain on our literary reading scale ($t = 3.8$). Hence, women are inclined to read more elitist reading materials when their husbands hold a high-status job.

Table 2a
Regression of literary book reading on individual and partner's status aspects

	Literary book reading							
	Men				Women			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables								
Degree of urbanization (1 = urban, 5 = rural)	−0.12***	−0.11***	−0.11***	−0.11***	−0.09***	−0.08***	−0.08***	−0.07***
Year of birth (1950 = 0)	−0.15***	−0.13***	−0.13***	−0.15***	−0.21***	−0.20***	−0.18***	−0.18***
Number of children <4 years of age	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02
Number of children 4–12 years of age	−0.01	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.03	−0.03*	−0.04*	−0.04*
Year of survey (1992 = 0)	−0.10***	−0.10***	−0.10***	−0.12***	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01
Education father in years (10 = 0)	0.07***	0.07***	0.05**	0.04*	0.09***	0.09***	0.07***	0.07***
Father's status score	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.08***	0.06***	0.05**	0.05**
Respondent characteristics								
Education in years (10 = 0)	0.37***	0.28***	0.26***	0.22***	0.40***	0.32***	0.30***	0.27***
Employment status (1 = paid work)	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.03	0.06***	0.05**	0.05*	0.03
Respondent's status score		0.18***	0.16***	0.14***		0.16***	0.13***	0.12***
Partner characteristics								
Partner's status score			0.11***	0.06**			0.14***	0.09***
Education partner in years (10 = 0)				0.12***				0.09***
Household income, natural log (8 = 0)				0.06**				0.06**
Variance explained	0.205	0.226	0.237	0.249	0.236	0.253	0.269	0.277

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 (N = 5600).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2b
Regression of popular book reading on individual and partner's status aspects

	Popular book reading							
	Men				Women			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables								
Degree of urbanization (1 = urban, 5 = rural)	0.06**	0.06**	0.06**	0.06**	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Year of birth (1950 = 0)	−0.18***	−0.18***	−0.18***	−0.17***	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.02
Number of children <4 years of age	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.01
Number of children 4–12 years of age	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Year of survey (1992 = 0)	−0.19***	−0.19***	−0.19***	−0.20***	−0.16***	−0.16***	−0.16***	−0.16***
Education father in years (10 = 0)	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.05*	−0.05*	−0.04	−0.04
Father's status score	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.05*	−0.05*	−0.04	−0.04
Respondent characteristics								
Education in years (10 = 0)	0.07***	0.07**	0.07**	0.07**	−0.07***	−0.05*	−0.04	−0.02
Employment status (1 = paid work)	−0.07**	−0.07**	−0.07**	−0.07**	−0.06**	−0.05**	−0.05*	−0.05*
Respondent's status score		0.01	0.01	0.01		−0.03	−0.02	−0.01
Partner characteristics								
Partner's status score			−0.01	0.00			−0.08***	−0.05*
Education partner in years (10 = 0)				−0.03				−0.06*
Household income, natural log (8 = 0)				0.02				0.00
Variance explained	0.110	0.109	0.109	0.109	0.057	0.057	0.062	0.063

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 (N = 5600).

* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.

Table 2b shows the results on the reading of popular books (family, regional, and romantic fiction). This kind of reading practice is far less socially differentiated than literary reading. Yet, these novels are more popular among men in rural than in urban areas ($\beta = 0.06$). For women, no urbanization differences were found. Furthermore, it seems that popular book reading is more preferred among older men ($\beta = -0.18$). Again, for women, no differentiation by year of birth is observed. At the same time, our results confirm an earlier established decline in the attractiveness of popular book reading; over the years, an ever diminishing part of the population is interested in family, regional, and romantic fiction. Due to the rapid expansion of the television market in the early 1990s, the traditional readership of popular books could choose entertainment programs from no less than seven Dutch channels, three public and four private, and a range of foreign channels. The increase in time spent watching television, notably commercial broadcasters, indicates a shift from popular reading towards popular television viewing. A second development that might explain part of the decline in popular book reading has to do with the very way we defined this reading category, leaving out the middle-brow genre of thrillers and suspense – a genre that, worldwide, scores highest on bestseller lists over the past two decades. With respect to family background, we find that women from high-status families are less likely to read popular books than women from low-status families.

In all models, popular book reading is hardly socially differentiated; the various effects are rather small and border on significance. For men, the higher educated seem to read popular books a little bit more ($\beta = 0.07$), while for women the educational effects are negative; especially lower educated women prefer these genres ($\beta = -0.07$). This result points towards a more omnivorous inclination among highly educated men, a result that was also found by Van Eijck (2001) regarding musical preferences. An interesting effect is that of work status. Our results show that particularly the non-working favor family, regional, and romantic fiction. As for social status effects, we find no individual status differences in popular reading. However, with regard to a partner's status and educational position, we find negative effects for women. A high-status husband causes women to prefer popular books to a lesser extent ($\beta = -0.05$), and the same goes for a partner's educational attainment ($\beta = -0.06$).

Again, we performed an additional analysis to investigate whether the effects of partner status for men and women vary significantly. Our results indicate that, indeed, for women a higher-status partner reduces the chance of reading popular novels; one point of increase in partner status leads to an extra -4.3 decline in popular reading ($t = 5.5$). We, therefore, conclude that women consider popular reading to be a lower-class activity that does not match their status position when their husband holds a high status position.

Table 2c summarizes social differentiation in television watching. In model 1, several controls show significant effects. First, television viewing is most popular in more urban areas ($\beta = -0.07$ for men and $\beta = -0.04$ for women). Secondly, a clear trend in rising popularity of television can be inferred from the positive effects of both year of birth and year of survey. Thirdly, restrictions of having young children at home do matter to some extent; pre-adolescents cause women and men to spend less time in front of the TV screen. Finally, family background causes some differentiation in television viewing as well. Father's status has a negative impact on women's television watching, while father's education negatively affects the amount of time men spend in front of the TV. Intense television viewing is typically an activity for those with lower schooling levels; each additional year of schooling causes a -1.7 point decline on our television scale for men and a -2.2 point decline for women. As expected, **Table 2c** (column 1) further indicates that intense television viewing is found more often among the non-working population.

Table 2c
Regression of television watching on individual and partner's status aspects

	Television watching							
	Men				Women			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables								
Degree of urbanization (1 = urban, 5 = rural)	−0.07***	−0.08***	−0.08***	−0.08***	−0.04*	−0.05*	−0.05**	−0.05**
Year of birth (1950 = 0)	0.10***	0.09***	0.09***	0.11***	0.11***	0.10***	0.09***	0.09***
Number of children <4 years of age	−0.03	−0.03	−0.03	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02
Number of children 4–12 years of age	−0.05**	−0.05**	−0.05**	−0.05**	−0.07***	−0.07***	−0.07***	−0.07***
Year of survey (1992 = 0)	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***	0.19***	0.20***	0.20***	0.20***	0.21***
Education father in years (10 = 0)	−0.07***	−0.07**	−0.06**	−0.05*	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.01
Father's status score	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	−0.01	−0.06**	−0.05*	−0.05*	−0.05*
Respondent characteristics								
Education in years (10 = 0)	−0.22***	−0.18***	−0.16***	−0.13***	−0.27***	−0.21***	−0.20***	−0.18***
Employment status (1 = paid work)	−0.11***	−0.11***	−0.10***	−0.09***	−0.10***	−0.09***	−0.09***	−0.07***
Respondent's status score		−0.09***	−0.07***	−0.06**		−0.11***	−0.10***	−0.09***
Partner characteristics								
Partner's status score			−0.10***	−0.05*			−0.05*	−0.01
Education partner in years (10 = 0)				−0.09***				−0.05*
Household income, natural log (8 = 0)				−0.08***				−0.06**
Variance explained	0.131	0.136	0.144	0.153	0.137	0.145	0.146	0.151

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 ($N = 5600$).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

To what extent is television watching related to social status? Model 2 demonstrates that respondent's social status position negatively affects intense television viewing ($\beta = -0.09$ for men and $\beta = -0.11$ for women). This clearly underscores that in addition to aspects of information processing, status-related concerns encourage people to disregard television viewing. Model 3 shows partner status to be influential as well. Having a partner in a high-status occupation, both men and women are less inclined to watch television as compared to people with a low-status partner. Although these effects decline when partner's educational attainment and income are included, these status effects suggest that even TV watching, an individual activity performed in the privacy of the home, is bound to be affected by characteristics of relevant others. Additional analyses on the differences in these status effects for men and women did not reveal significant gendered variation in partner status effects.

In this study, status effects are interpreted in terms of a specific motivation to engage in certain activities. In order for such motivations to be put to action, resources are required. It can be argued that status motivation will, therefore, have a larger impact when the (economic or cultural) resources necessary for status-granting activities are more abundant. This expectation prompted our final analysis, where we tested whether status interacts with income or education. The results (not shown in the tables) indicated that status effects do not depend on income level for any of our dependent variables. But some interactions with educational level were found. For men, the impact of status on reading literature increased significantly with rising levels of education. For popular reading, on the contrary, both men and women revealed more negative status effects as their schooling level went up. For TV watching, no significant interactions were found. The significant interaction found for literary reading is in line with the argument that status motivation more readily leads to media use if the required resources are available. The negative interaction terms for popular reading indicate that ample cultural resources also make one more likely to shun types of media use that are deemed less appropriate. Here, too, status considerations become more relevant as the amount of relevant resources goes up, although in this case it is not a matter of resources enabling one to engage in status seeking behavior. Rather, higher schooling levels seem to make people more likely to shun popular books because of status considerations.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This article focused on the question whether and to what extent a primarily individual leisure activity like media use is affected not only by respondent's status position but also by that of his/her partner. We employed information from four surveys on 5600 individuals from 2844 couples living in the Netherlands to answer these questions. To enable a broad test of our hypotheses, we selected three media activities that represented, on the one hand, highbrow taste (literary reading), and, on the other hand, lowbrow taste (family, regional, and romantic fiction reading; hours spent watching television). In spite of the fact that media use is primarily an individual practice that lacks immediate visibility to the world outside of the family circle, we expected a person's individual status position to be relevant to predicting social differentiation in media use. Additionally, we expected partner status to affect media consumption. Note that we tested our hypotheses on status effects controlling for aspects of information processing, such as educational attainment and the amount of economic resources (household income). This makes for a strong testing of the existence of social influences on media consumption.

Our results clearly confirm the notion that status matters in the differentiation of media use. First, even if we take into account several controls such as social background, educational level, and time restrictions, substantial effects of a person's occupational status remain. Yet, what is more striking is that the status of one's partner is meaningful as well. A higher individual status position and a higher status position of a partner enhance the preference for literary reading. The reading of popular fiction, a practice seriously in decline – at least for the genres we classified here as popular reading, proved to be far less socially differentiated than literary reading. Admittedly, a different picture is likely to arise when future research takes into account other reading genres, notably suspense, thriller, and adventure novels. Since the 1980s, these genres enjoy worldwide a growing popularity and they lend themselves to multiple tie-ins, resulting in popular film versions and talk show items. Meanwhile, many of these (pre- and post-WWII) suspense novels (as well as the films based on them) have reached the status of classics, thereby tending to be perceived as legitimate a genre as literature. This blurring of boundaries between fiction genres complicates the sociologist's attempt to analyze the social differentiation of fiction reading. If possible, the construction of broader media repertoires is recommendable.

Compared to literary reading, status effects of television viewing are obviously reversed, but they are still significant. High-status individuals refrain from television viewing more than low-status individuals, and people with a high-status partner watch significantly less television. Again, note that these effects are established while controlling for all confounders we could think of. Consequently, our results firmly corroborate the expectation that there are social pressures at work in deciding which media to choose. It may safely be assumed that (elitist) group conventions on which books and media to prefer cause people to adjust their taste to the preferences of significant others in their social surrounding.

Secondly, we examined whether these social status effects work differently for men than for women, and indeed they do. Women adjust their taste to their husband's status position more than vice versa, which is an interesting confirmation of the male-dominance hypothesis. In future research, however, this hypothesis should be tested with more statistical power and with more advanced techniques such as diagonal reference modeling.

When it comes to status effects on cultural tastes, our research shows the significance of taking into account relevant others. The status of those with whom one associates affects a person's cultural behavior. This may be due to a process of adaptation, an effect of information exchange between partners, or, at least in the case of television, more directly, a matter of watching together and, therefore, needing to adjust to the preferences of your companions. Also, status claims are always established and confirmed through social interaction, which is another reason why attributes of the interacting partners are of great importance. Looking at the social characteristics of interacting partners clearly adds to our knowledge of status assignment and the way status claims work out in daily life. By demonstrating that cultural taste patterns are not fully determined by one's personal qualities, but also by partner characteristics, we re-affirm that taste formation is a highly social process. We found clear indications of social pressure, which implies the existence of group-specific cultural preferences that allow taste patterns to remain functioning as recognizable vehicles for socio-cultural distinction.

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Appendix A. Descriptives of status scores of minor occupational groups

	Status score	% Total	% Male	% Female
Doctors and other medical professionals	1.90	1.5	1.2	1.9
Business professionals	1.69	1.6	1.9	1.2
Teachers and professionals in education	1.51	7.2	6.1	8.2
Other professionals and executive officers	0.97	7.3	7.7	6.8
Scientists, engineers, and technicians	0.88	4.0	6.2	1.8
Nurses and associate professionals in medicine	0.69	6.1	1.7	10.4
Managers and proprietors in sales and services	0.68	2.6	3.6	1.5
Technical professionals	0.67	2.8	5.3	0.4
Senior managers in private or public sector	0.65	7.3	11.6	3.1
Brokers and sales agents	0.59	2.1	3.2	1.0
Transport clerks	0.30	6.7	4.3	9.0
Secretaries and receptionists	0.22	3.9	0.4	7.3
Account clerks	0.21	7.0	4.4	9.5
Mechanics and electricians	0.06	3.8	6.9	0.8
Market traders and traveling salesmen	−0.29	5.7	2.6	8.7
Plumbers and construction workers	−0.37	3.3	6.7	0.1
Personal service workers	−0.67	3.4	1.2	5.6
Farm workers	−0.72	1.8	2.3	1.3
Protective service workers	−0.74	2.7	4.7	0.8
Transport operatives	−0.84	4.3	7.1	1.6
Manual workers in material extraction/processing	−0.86	2.8	4.6	0.9
Machine operatives	−0.99	2.6	3.7	1.5
Care workers	−1.02	5.6	0.2	10.8
Craft workers (e.g., furniture makers, masons)	−1.12	0.6	1.2	0.1
Manual workers in textiles and clothing	−1.64	1.6	0.6	2.7
Chefs and waiting staff	−1.75	1.8	0.6	2.9

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 (*N* = 5600).

Appendix B. Trends in reading and television watching (mean values)

		Mean				Difference
		1992	1998	2000	2002	
Literary book reading (scale 0–100)	All	27.8	27.5	27.7	25.5	−2.3
	Men	24.4	21.7	18.9	16.8	−7.6
	Women	30.9	33.1	36.3	34.1	3.1
Popular book reading (scale 0–100)	All	30.8	17.6	16.6	17.2	−13.6
	Men	16.9	5.9	5.2	5.6	−11.3
	Women	43.7	28.9	27.8	28.6	−15.1
Television watching (hours: scale 0–100)	All	43.7	54.1	55.9	57.7	14.0
	Men	42.1	51.0	53.7	56.3	14.2
	Women	45.1	57.0	58.1	59.0	13.9

Source: Family Survey Dutch Population 1992–2003 (*N* = 5600).

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Further reading

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Gerbert Kraaykamp is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology of the Radboud University of Nijmegen. His main fields of interest and current works are in the areas of social stratification and life-style differentiation. More specifically, his research focuses on the causes and consequences of educational inequality. He has published on these subjects in Dutch and international journals.

Wout Ultee defended his Ph.d. in 1977 at the University of Utrecht and is since 1987 professor of sociology at the Radboud University Nijmegen, and from 2002 to 2006 chaired RC28, the Research Committee on Social Stratification and Mobility of the International Sociological Association. He co-authored a textbook sociology, developed a methodology of problem articulation, and published on a range of topics including religion and suicide, educational heterogamy, long-term unemployment, and leaving church.

Koen van Eijck is Associate Professor at the Centre for Sociological Research (CeSO) of the Catholic University of Leuven. His main research focuses on cultural taste patterns and social inequality. He has published articles on musical taste, cultural participation, omnivorousness, and media use.

Kees van Rees is Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities of Tilburg University and presently a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Sociology at Princeton University. His primary research interests lie in the areas of cultural taste patterns and changing conditions of legitimacy in the cultural field. He co-authored a book on the Dutch trade book field from 1800 to 2000.